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ABSTRACT

With the increased longevity American women experience, it is important to begin to define the strengths and resources women bring to old age. Late parental, married women with a mean age of 58 (N=75) completed an interview questionnaire which included open- and closed-ended and scale items. Data analysis developed four life-style orientations (Paid Worker, Volunteer Worker, Partial Worker, Family Woman) which reflected role participation in informal and formal support systems. Findings suggested that positive adaptation to the experiences of aging was related to patterns of high investment of both time and emotional energy in meaningful relationships in supportive networks. Although most of the women were involved in many aspects of their worlds, the family-friend relationships correlated most significantly with life satisfaction. However, both paid and vounteer work added important dimensions to their feelings of being people of value. There did not appear to be any one work focus appropriate to all women. (Author)

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OLDER WOMEN: THE MEANING OF INVOLVEMENT IN SUPPORT SYSTEMS

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The older population is predominantly female. Therefore, it is particularly important to define the strengths and resources women can bring to their later years. Research and our own interactions with older women reinforce the belief that women can and do function effectively. Too often, however, we focus on functions exclusively and risk losing sight of the affective factors in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, this study* was undertaken to increase understanding of the meanings women ascribe to social role relationships in their informal family-friend networks and in their formal worlds of work and voluntary organizations.

The sample was married women in the late parental stage of life. They were a group called upon to adapt to less active involvement with their children and a concomitant increased emphasis on their roles as wives and members of the larger community. They needed to assess if their self-definitions were in tune with the changes in their lives. These challenges asked the women to search for pathways which will fill their present personal needs and at the same time develop links with those beyond themselves which might serve as a foundation for supports in their later years.

In this study, seventy-five women, with a median age of fifty-eight, were interviewed in their homes. A question-

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naire was used that included open-ended, closed-ended, scale items, a life satisfaction index and a self-esteem scale. The focus was on the experiences of a specific group -- the educated woman. Formal education is a crucial variable in the successful social engagement of women. It enables them greater acaccessbility to options. By exploring this group's subjective experiences, it is possible to begin to clarify how women, relieved of child-rearing responsibilities and relatively unencumbered by income and social restraints, can utilize available resources to develop effective support networks.

The data analysis developed eight typologies of life-style orientations. They were based upon a combination of self-perceived involvement in the roles of daughter, wife, mother, grandmother, sister and friend, and time spent and self-perceived involvement in the roles of paid worker, volunteer worker and organization member. The four types that presented reasonable numbers were a focus of the study. They were the Paid Worker (23%), the Volunteer Worker (12%), the Partial Worker (21%), and the Family Woman (23%). These orientations reflect individual social role participation and therefore the special relationship each woman had with the varied aspects of her world.

The study illuminated the range of needs, wishes and abilities women bring to the experiences of aging. There was no one magic pattern applicable to and successful for all.

Rather, each woman sought her own answer; a response which reflected her personality as well as the influences and resources of her social worlds. It is noteworthy that the majority of the women in this study found rewarding relationships among their available options. Indeed, many women spoke of the opportunities these years hold for self-development. They saw it as a time to focus on oneself freed from the role demands of former days:

> I try to select things to do that fill my needs. I try not to get involved with too many 'shoulds'.

In addition, the findings suggest that it is the intensity or quality of involvement, rather than just time spent in any role, that related to subjective measures of life satisfaction. For these women, high involvement in self-perceived satisfying relationships and activities related to high life satisfaction and self-esteem. The four life styles reflect these conclusions.

Three of the prototypes, the Paid Worker, the Volunteer Worker and the Family Woman, were persons who invested not only time, but a deep quality of involvement in their activities. They seemed able to define their needs, exercise some options and reap satisfying rewards. Their involvement patterns related to high life satisfaction.

In contrast, the Partial Worker invested time, but a lower level of involvement in her affiliations. She appeared less content with her life and had lower life satis-

faction scores. This woman reported having difficulty in finding personal rewards in her family, friend or community relationships.

The basic nature of the work orientations varied among the four life styles. Foci ranged from paid work to volunteer work to familial affairs. However, in all cases it was the informal relationships that correlated most significantly with life satisfaction. All of the women were strikingly family/friend centered despite some impressive work histories. Husbands, friends and children were important as emotional supports, husbands and friends as social partners. The words spoken by these women vividly convey the meanings these relationships held for them.

These women were wives on a daily basis. For most, her husband made her feel like an important person. She enjoyed his company and turned to him with her problems. She remarked that:

> My husband is tremendously supportive of me. We share a lot together.
>
> He's easy going and is a calming influence on me. I rely on his judgment to augment my own.

For most, their lives together definitely improved since the children left home:

> It's a delightful, different world since the children left. We're more relaxed. We go out when we want. It's a gift to be alone together.

However, some husbands can be more demanding than in earlier

years, encroaching on a woman's perceived need for space to develop herself:

> He is very supportive and encouraging. However, since the children left he has gotten more time consuming. He likes me to travel and play golf with him. He feels I can have more time for him because there are no children around.

For a small number of women the relationship presented difficult moments. A Partial Worker stated:

> My husband definitely has an influence on me. We usually do what he wants to do, especially when we are together. . . . And we are together a lot.

However, for most of the women (80 percent), being a wife was a very satisfying role.

Friends were another major link in these women's lives. They were confidants with whom you could discuss your problems, as well as crucial parts of a social life. These women either saw or spoke to one or more friends often during the week and 70 percent reported that being a friend was a very satisfying role. Women spoke of "close and dear friends" or "friends who are a big support with my problems." A prominent theme was the "need" to be with people:

> I've always been social. A lot of my friends have moved or died so I've had to make new friends. My friends are a big support.

Children played a major role as emotional supports. Fifty-nine percent of the women either saw or spoke to a child several times a week, but mentioned that their children made few major demands upon their time. Most seemed to prefer it that

way. These women had time for themselves now and they wanted to focus on it. This was especially so for the working woman:

> You can't develop yourself if the children are always around. If they live too close by they take up a tremendous amount of your time.

Most preferred to limit interactions to social occasions or "assisting" when called upon. For some, however, such as the Family Woman, who represented 30 percent of the sample, family relations and helping the children were a major center of attention. She reported that:

> I'm here if I'm needed. I give up my time for them.

However, she added this caveat:

> During the summer I give up my volunteer work for them, but they are at a distance so being with them is not constant.

Informal relationships were basic to these women's overall satisfaction, but both paid and volunteer work added important dimensions to being people of value and worthy of self-esteem. However, the women in this study had been socialized over the years to be full-time mothers and wives and not full-time workers. Work for most of them, unlike for men, was not the primary base of their lives. While almost all of the women (95 percent) participated in paid or volunteer work or both, 44 percent were very involved workers and 56 percent were not. For most of those who did volunteer or paid work, this activity was a route to meet both personal and financial needs:

> I've learned a new skill. I love the independence of it. Work keeps me alive. Gives me a sense of self worth.

and added, "It keeps my mind active and vital. Besides I haven't enough to do at home, and I like the money."

For another type of woman, the family centered approach was much more satisfying:

> I wouldn't want to work full-time. I enjoy the flexibility of not working.

The issue of to work or not to work was a thorny one for many women. It is only in the past five to ten years that norms have developed which challenged the prestige of volunteer work as a long range life style for women and elevated paid work. Options and freedom are dynamic challenges but they can bring with them indecision and confusion. It is not always easy to cast off old patterns and values and find the instant flexibility to adopt new ones. Realignment requires deep thought and reanalysis of personal commitments and wishes. Some women struggled with these issues:

> I made my children independent. Now I'm a casualty myself. I must work on making myself a person.

> The women's movement took a generation of contented homemakers and turned them into malcontents. It made me feel I 'should' be a paid worker. People look askance when you say you do volunteer work and sports. Makes you question if you made the right decision. I know I must answer the question myself, but it is nard to get to that point.

However, this study found that involvement in some aspect of community life was necessary for maintaining a positive out-

look. These activities provided a set of varied experiences in which a woman could pursue several alternatives with a sense of worthwhileness. They also provided a cushion from the pressures of personal concerns.

It is those women who had come to understand their needs during this period of shifting family responsibilities and changing social values that were best able to immerse themselves in a range of self-satisfying relationships. They could invest not only time, but more importantly satisfying emotional energy, in meaningful relations in supportive networks.

The four life styles represent individual responses to the challenges of living. There was not one orientation appropriate to all women. Each sought her own comfortable balance. However, the importance of supportive relationships as a life-enhancing resource was a common bond these women shared:

> These relationships help me because I like having people around. I'm not a loner. They are an ear to talk to--a support when you need them. They make life happier... I help them--they help me. It's very reciprocal.